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## Balance is Bunk – Organizational and Marital Turnover in Dual Academic Career Couples

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## **Balance is Bunk: Organizational and Martial Turnover in Dual Academic Career Couples**

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Academic couples enjoy unique benefits and yet also face unique challenges in being linked to each other both romantically and professionally. Being part of an academic couple can be both intellectually and professionally beneficial to each partner by providing opportunities to share intellectual interests, help one another in their career path, providing a sounding board for work issues, and engaging in overlapping professional networks. However, in academia where power and privilege often fall along gendered lines, being part of an academic couple presents tricky terrain both professionally and in the romantic relationship, such that couples can find it particularly challenging to remain with an employing university and committed to a significant other relationship.

Dual hiring of the partners in an academic couple presents a challenge for many women faculty but an opportunity for universities willing and equipped to navigate those waters. For instance, women make up 36% of the professoriate, and women (40%) are more likely than men (34%) to have academic partners (Schiebinger, Henderson, & Gilmartin, 2008).

Unfortunately, women more often perceive their professional mobility being undermined as a result of being part of an academic couple yet they often refuse job offers if their partner doesn't have a satisfactory position on the horizon (Schiebinger et al., 2008) and women are more likely to experience negative professional consequences if they change academic jobs to support a partner's career path (McElrath, 1992). However, dual hiring offers universities an opportunity to hire the best and brightest, and to also achieve greater gender equity. For instance, 53% of first-hire women who are senior academics (i.e., full or endowed professors) are part of an academic couple where their male partner is of equal rank (Schiebinger et al., 2008). Thus, in recruiting women as the first hire in the recruitment of an academic couple allows universities to break the stereotype of senior academics negotiating a position for a junior partner.

Dual career couples must often ask questions of themselves and each other such as, "Whose career is primary in this situation or relationship?" The answer that academic couples in particular give more often than those who have an employed but non-academic partner is that both careers are equally important (Schiebinger et al., 2008) and, not surprisingly, this suggests that academic couples place great importance on equity in their relationships. However, even in academic couples, men are more likely to consider their career more important than that of their partner regardless of the man's professorial rank (Schiebinger et al., 2008) and women are

more likely to subordinate their careers to those of their partners (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988). Interestingly, women at the full or endowed professor level value career equity more highly compared to those at other ranks (Schiebinger et al., 2008).

Not surprisingly, academic couples vote with their feet and are apt to leave institutions of higher education when they perceive those organizations as unsupportive of their work and/or nonwork lives. While organizational research has yet to empirically study what makes a difference in reducing the organizational turnover of academic couples, prior research offers several factors to consider including compensation, full-time employment for both partners, and the respect that each partner perceives for what they bring to the table. First, research finds conflicting results related to the relative compensation of partners in an academic couple compared to peer faculty members, with one study indicating men with academic partners earn less than those with non-academic partners (Astin & Milem, 1997), and another study suggesting that both partners in an academic couple do *not* make significantly less compared to peer faculty members (Schiebinger et al., 2008). Second, an overwhelmingly majority (88 percent) of faculty who landed a sequential dual hire at their institution observed that the first hire would have refused the job offer had it not included an employment offer for his or her partner (Schiebinger et al., 2008). Thus, future research should explore the relative importance of these and other factors in predicting the organizational turnover of partners in an academic couple. Last, the term “trailing spouse” generally embodies the notion that one partner’s career is taking a back seat to that of the other partner. That term often also carries a stigma that the second hire is less qualified or valued than the first hire, which can result in treating that faculty member with less respect and as a second-class citizen. This can lead to not only poor working conditions for everyone in the department but strained relations within the academic couple. An area ripe for future research relates to the recruitment, selection and retention practices that may help the department avoid hiring a less qualified second hire and to communicating and affirming their value in the department once a qualified second hire is brought on board.

A rarely considered, but perhaps just as important, topic is that of marital or relationship turnover among academic couples. Unfortunately, research is silent on how the unique work-life challenges faced by academic couples may motivate marital/relationship turnover. Like other dual career couples, academic couples often compromise their nonwork lives to maintain or advance their careers and/or compromise their work lives to maintain or advance their nonwork lives. Being part of an academic couple is fraught on many fronts, and particularly so with the all but inevitable power imbalance it creates within the couple and comparisons that may be drawn

related to the partners' careers. One second hire partner had this to say about the challenges created by the power imbalance:

"I am a partner hire. Though I am competent and qualified, I know that I have a job because the university wanted to hire my partner. Dual hire situations are not easy to obtain. While I am grateful to have a position that allows me to do work that I enjoy and still live in the same house as my partner, the dual hire scenario ultimately creates a power imbalance from its inception. Upon starting my new position, my program chair took me to lunch. While there, we met another colleague from the College of Education. To introduce me, my program chair said, "This is our spousal hire." I had no name or qualifications. My only element of significance was being married to someone the university wanted to hire. Thus, I began my job from a lower position." (Atwood & Fortney, p. 19)

Further, given that power imbalance, it seems important for universities and hiring departments to engage in recruitment and selection processes of an academic couple such that not only do the existing faculty members perceive the process as legitimate, but where both partners in the couple perceive it as legitimate and that both partners are valued for the experience, expertise, and skills they bring to the department. Doing otherwise not only creates problems within the department or departments hiring the couple, but may lead to competitiveness between partners. Competitiveness is often associated with dual academic career situations, which is almost always harmful to the partners' relationship with one another (Hall & Hall, 1979; Holmstrom, 1973). Further, couples who are linked via either the same employing organization or by working in the same field, as academic couples are, often experience more strain-based work-family conflict compared to couples who do not share an employer or professional field (Halbesleben, Wheeler, & Rossi, 2012). Thus, the potential for marital or relationship turnover in these couples may be greater due to power imbalances, competitiveness that is difficult to avoid, and the associated work-family conflict that comes from working with one's partner.

One might argue that for academic couples, every work or nonwork issue is a work-life balance issue because their domains are so intertwined. There are many opportunities for researchers to examine the resources and situations that universities can offer academic couples that might enhance that work-life balance and limit both organizational and marital turnover in academic couples. First, offering mentoring to both partners in academic couples may prove beneficial, especially for women. Perhaps more important would be pairing new faculty members who are part of an academic couple with mentors who are also part of an

academic couple and who have navigated successfully that challenging terrain. Doing so may help the new faculty members acclimate to their roles in academia and achieve greater work-life balance. A mentor who is a close similar or comparable other may help the new hires broaden their perspectives about what is possible with respect to balancing the demands of both faculty life and life in an academic couple. Second, while perhaps out of the norm or beyond common expectations, researchers might examine the impact on academic couples' work-life balance and their organizational and relationship turnover in light of household support options offered by their universities. Even in dual career couples, women still do the majority of the housework, and one study suggests that female scientists perform nearly twice as much housework as their male partners (Schiebinger & Gilmartin, 2010). However, employing household help increases the productivity of both male and female faculty, even after controlling for rank and salary (Schiebinger & Gilmartin, 2010). Some universities offer on-site childcare and college tuition, and most offer health care and retirement benefits. Providing a benefit that assists with housework could be another element in a cafeteria-style benefits plan.

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